

# Maurice Hinchey NEWS

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### **HINCHEY BLASTS BUSH ADMINISTRATION FOR FAILING TO FUND HERITAGE RIVERS PROGRAM**

KINGSTON - U.S. Representative Maurice Hinchey (D-NY) today sharply criticized the Bush Administration for its apparent decision to discontinue the American Heritage Rivers Initiative (AHRI). Hinchey was reacting to statements made by Secretary of Agriculture Ann Veneman in response to questions posed by Hinchey.

"It is now clear that the Bush Administration plans to discontinue the Heritage Rivers initiative," said Hinchey. "In its very short lifetime, this program has achieved significant successes with the Hudson River and the thirteen other rivers in the initiative. It makes no sense to stop the initiative now just when it was hitting its stride."

The American Heritage Rivers Initiative was announced by President Clinton in his 1997 State of the Union speech. In 1998 he designated 14 rivers to participate in the program, including the Hudson. The designation came with no new federal funds, but each of the designated rivers was assigned a "river navigator" who is responsible for coordinating the efforts of federal and local governments and community groups in their efforts to improve their rivers. These positions are funded through the budgets of various federal agencies. The Natural Resources Conservation Service, a division of the U.S. Department of Agriculture, funds the river navigator positions for the Hudson River and the Upper Susquehanna/Lackawanna River Heritage Areas.

As a member of the Agriculture Subcommittee of the House Appropriations Committee Hinchey submitted written questions to Veneman after an April budget hearing. He noted that the administration's budget plan zeroed out NRCS's participation in the Heritage Rivers initiative and asked Veneman what would happen to the two river navigators. Veneman recently responded that the contract for the navigator position on the Upper Susquehanna/Lackawanna project would not be extended and that the NRCS employee currently assigned as river navigator for the Hudson would now take responsibility for both rivers and would be limited to working on USDA-authorized programs.

"The key to the success of the Heritage Rivers initiative is the coordination of the efforts of the many groups and agencies with an interest in improving and preserving these great rivers," Hinchey added. "Limiting the river navigator to USDA programs means the end of this concerted effort. Giving him responsibility for the Upper Susquehanna/Lackawanna designation takes his focus away from the Hudson."

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AHRI has had a significant positive impact on the Hudson River since its river navigator, J. Eric Scherer, was assigned in 1999. Scherer facilitated the complex process of initiating the transfer of three historic lighthouse stations from the U.S. Coast Guard to New York State and local organizations. He also expedited the launching of a \$2.8 million riverfront revitalization project in Catskill. Among his current projects, Scherer is working with the New York State Department of Environmental Conservation, NY Sea Grant College Program, and a number of other river-based organizations to develop a pilot program to address river pollution from boats and marinas.

"Providing funding for this one position has been a very cost-effective means of making positive change on the Hudson," Hinchey added. "These successes have been duplicated at the other designated rivers as well. But the decision to eliminate the program is not based on a fair assessment of its effectiveness. It's driven by the ultra-conservative ideology that is prevalent in this administration."

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